

Report of Dunse History Society Lecture

27th September 2023

The Dunse History Society was entertained and enlightened by a talk entitled 'Politics and Corruption in the Nineteenth Century Borders' by David McLean on 27th September. Political corruption and election violence in 19th century UK was common. The 1707 Act of Union gave Scotland 45 MPs with 513 for England and Wales, 30 served the counties (landowners and substantial tenants) and 15 the boroughs (manufacturers, professionals, shopkeepers). The four Border counties had 1 MP each with 4 for the Boroughs. Voting was restricted to wealthy people, including women, with the Borders having about 4,000 voters. The 1832 First Reform Act increased the electorate to 65,000. Owners of land in different constituencies had votes in each. This act also barred women from voting, a situation lasting until 1918. Voting was not secret and occurred across counties over a 3/4 week period, although only one day per constituency. In the early 19th century there were 2 political parties, Tory (for conservatism) and Whig, which became the Liberal party, (for reform). Political corruption fell into 4 categories: Treating, Bribery, Intimidation and Faggot Voting, all of which occurred in the Borders. Treating, the offer of favours including drink during polling and bribery, buying people for votes. Intimidation was exerted by landowners on their tenant farmers over renewal of leases and on shopkeepers and tradesmen when told their accounts would be closed, also by mob action driving off voters and candidates. Examples of corruption were reported in the Borders including, Berwick, Duns, Roxburgh, Selkirk, Hawick. Faggot Voting was a quirk of Scots law and excelled on the Borders far more than elsewhere in Scotland. A landowner could transfer superiority of areas of his land worth £10 or more to another (relations, friends, tenants) while not losing possession. The many resulting transferred individuals could vote and would vote to the wishes of the landowner. Faggot Voters would travel from all over to vote in a constituency. This was practised by both parties but given up earlier by the Whigs who then took the moral high ground. Violence could arise when Faggot Voters descended on a constituency. Dragoons were sent to Hawick in 1837 when Tory voters were stripped by Whigs and thrown into the river before the mob moved on to damage Tory houses. This was the most violent election in Scotland. A riot was also recorded in Selkirk when the mob prevented voters voting. By 1866 a law permitting urban educated working class men to vote was introduced to greatly increase the electorate and attempt to stop corruption and violence (rural men enfranchisement came later). In 1880 the most corrupt election in British history occurred in Peebles with an associated riot in which Tory voters were pelted in spite of a police escort. The 1884 Act, however, had real teeth and finally brought an end to corruption. There was never again violence at elections and Faggot Voting dwindled. Nevertheless, the property qualification and associated multiple voting endured into the 20th century.

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